

“Israel is simply too precious a gift to be left solely to the Israelis.
We all have a stake in its future.” BY STEVEN SCHNUR

ISRAEL IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF MY GRANDPARENTS

In the spring of 1927 two German couples journeyed to Palestine, sailing from Naples to Cairo, then traveling by open car through the crumbling remnants of the Ottoman Empire, stopping in Jericho, Jerusalem, Damascus, and Beirut as well as celebrated ruins along the way. It was a trip into a landscape of ancient stone, endless sand, and infinite illusive-ness, a place that seemed to live more vitally in the imagination than reality.

The Bible was everywhere—in the ruins half buried by millennia of desert drift, in wadis and oases bearing names as old as the Patriarchs, in the nomadic clans, and in the waters of the Nile and Jordan rivers. And yet, its essential message of tolerance was all but forgotten by inhabitants struggling to wrest a meager existence from the bone-dry dust, still harboring centuries’ old tribal animosities that, time and again, would drench this barren soil with new generations of blood.

The four travelers immortalized their journey in a leather-bound volume of sepia-tinted photographs that eventually passed to their children and grandchildren. At the time, neither couple realized they were to become inseparably united through the betrothal of their children,



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Left: The Western Wall (Kotel), Jerusalem, 1927. Above: A close-up of three of my grandparents at the Wall.

exactly twenty years later, just two years after their miraculous escape from Nazi genocide. Within a year of that union the State of Israel came into being, and on its sixtieth anniversary a grandson of those four travelers followed in his forebears’ footsteps, the monochromic memories of their journey coloring his perceptions as he wandered the narrow streets of Jerusalem’s Old City.

Beneath a photo taken by my maternal grandfather of his wife and future in-laws he penned the words, “*An der Klage-mauer*” (near the Wailing Wall). Pictured in the narrow passage that limited access to the Kotel before June 1967 are three of my four grandparents as well as a uniformed guard and a young Hassid dressed in black hat and knickers. The ancestral photo depicts only a handful of men and women standing together in a dark alley hemmed in on one side by crumbling dwellings and overwhelmed on the other by massive Herodian stones so distinct that as I approached the Wall our first evening in Jerusalem, I was able to identify the exact stone my grandparents had once stood beside. Placing a hand on its

rough-hewn surface, I felt myself slip between the folds of that palimpsest that is Israel, the innumerable layers of history, legend, and personal identification that color what we see when we encounter Eretz Yisrael.

For ten days, fifty-five Westchester Reform Temple members joined with our clergy and two Israeli guides in a journey to the essence of the many Israels that inhabit our hearts and bedevil our thoughts: the Israel of biblical antiquity; of Greek, Roman, Turkish, and British domination; of Zionism and Palestinian rights; of entrenched Orthodox settlers and nascent Reform synagogues.

We journeyed from the Negev of Ben Gurion to the contested Golan Heights, stopping in Tel Aviv, Caesarea, the Galilee, Safed, Masada, Jerusalem, and a dozen other echoing venues, speaking with residents and scholars, journalists and clerics to unwrap and comprehend the endless intricacies of a nation laden with history, burning with zealotry, burdened by conflicting claims, and blessed with energy and intellect. Israel thrives on complexity: endemic intolerance